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SUBJECT: KUCUKARMUTLU: APPLE OF ISTANBUL'S EYE AND
POLITICAL HOT POTATO

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¶11. (u) Summary: A storm is brewing in the Istanbul neighborhood of Kucukarmutlu, pitting Istanbul Technical University (ITU) and its plans for a technology park against local residents and politicians. ITU recently reiterated its intention to seek implementation of court decisions to evict tens of thousands of illegal residents on 90 hectares of land it owns in Kucukarmutlu, one of the largest remaining "gecekondu," or squatter, neighborhoods in central Istanbul (Note: Istanbul's sprawling poorer suburbs still contain such neighborhoods). Although merely the most recent of many such disputes, its breath-taking views of the Bosphorus and convenient proximity to downtown Istanbul make Kucukarmutlu a particularly contentious and intractable dispute between the rule of law and political expediency and reality. End Summary.

¶12. (u) Settled between 40 and 50 years ago by economic migrants from the Black Sea and central Anatolia, Kucukarmutlu tells a story typical of greater Istanbul. Poor city planning and an inability to absorb a flood of immigrants led many of the poorer arrivals to construct their own housing on whatever available land they could find. Local politicians eager for fresh votes looked the other way as these "gecekondu," or squatter, settlements illegally appropriated both government and private property. In an effort to meet the needs of constituents and appeal for their votes, local officials later began to provide municipal services (e.g., water, electricity) to these communities, gradually converting them to more established neighborhoods. Today, with newly paved roads, bus routes, schools, mosques, an array of local businesses, and even some middle-to-higher quality housing stock, only its relative poverty and incongruous breath-taking views of the Bosphorus distinguish Kucukarmutlu from other central Istanbul neighborhoods. A resident and shopkeeper boasted recently to poloff that Kucukarmutlu is "the apple of Istanbul's eye."

¶13. (sbu) Istanbul courts have already ruled in favor of ITU in hundreds of legal cases in the neighborhood. Now worried they may be evicted from their homes, thousands of Kucukarmutlu residents marched on October 18 to the offices of Sariyer district Mayor Yusuf Tulun. In his second (non-consecutive) term as Sariyer mayor, Tulun told the press that his office opposed the ITU project. "There isn't a square centimeter of empty space. They (ITU) made their plans without asking us... We should give the people deeds (to their houses)," he added. In an earlier meeting with poloff, Tulun emphasized his desire to be responsive to his constituents and detailed plans for popular projects in each of Sariyer's neighborhoods. Nurettin Cosan, the elected neighborhood representative for most of Kucukarmutlu, separately told poloff that both his constituents and the university are victims in this matter; a just solution must be found that takes care of all concerned (read: the government or city should shoulder the costs involved). ITU Rector Faruk Karadogan told poloff that ITU is determined to keep the land. If the politicians are willing to take responsibility for the situation, however, Karadogan thinks a win-win solution can be found (probably by building larger apartment blocks and relocating some residents).

¶14. (sbu) Despite the fact that much of the land in Kucukarmutlu belongs to the greater Istanbul municipality, senior Istanbul officials are largely sympathetic to the plight of the Kucukarmutlu residents. Ramazan Evren, the Secretary General of the Istanbul Municipality, reminded

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poloff that the city had reached relocation agreements with a number of Kucukarmutlu residents in order to expand a key access road through the neighborhood to the city's major international highway. He estimated, however, that similar agreements for the whole area would cost USD 1 billion -- a price neither the city nor the government is prepared to shoulder (Note: Because many of the residents merely "rent" their apartments, Karadogan claims the costs would be lower).

Evren noted that the city is working closely with ITU (a claim that Karadogan denied), the Sariyer municipality, and others to look for solutions, but added that he could not envision any in which the neighborhood would be evacuated. Ilker Ayci, newly-appointed member of the Istanbul Executive Committee, concurred that the neighborhood was unlikely to be evacuated. He shrugged his shoulders, reminded poloff that

the problem began decades ago, and remarked, "we just got caught holding the hot potato."

15. (u) Mahmut Ovur, Istanbul editor for daily Sabah newspaper, described the situation in similar terms. Despite having a valid property deed and court decisions to back its claims, Ovur saw no chance at all for ITU to have the eviction decisions enforced. Instead, he argued that, in all likelihood, ITU was merely hoping to force local officials to compensate it with another piece of land elsewhere.

According to Ovur, in addition to proper city planning (long absent in Istanbul), the solution to such gecekondu problems is to open up new land for development and to sell squatters the deeds to their land (ideas supported by PM Erdogan in proposed reforms last year, reftel). Ovur predicted that after Turkey gets its invitation to begin EU negotiations in December, the AKP government would push ahead with reforms along these lines. The bigger problem, according to Ovur, is illegal construction. Most buildings in Istanbul are built on legally-owned land, but without proper building permits. As a result, tens of thousands of buildings (with more being built every day) are now believed to be susceptible to damage or collapse in a major earthquake. Reinforcing or rebuilding them would cost tens of billions of dollars and the city has yet to put forth a plan to address this key issue.

16. (sbu) Comment: Only seven months in office, the new Istanbul municipality has already grappled with several property issues. Plans to demolish buildings susceptible to flood damage in the Alibeykoy neighborhood sparked public outrage until the city offered generous relocation packages to affected residents. Even after concluding similar offers prior to the destruction of a dozen or so buildings in the Pendik district to make room for a school, local officials and police faced open riots by nervous gecekondu residents there. Given the difficulties sparked by these small-scale problems, it is highly unlikely that local officials would be capable (were they so inclined) of evacuating the much-larger contested area in the Kucukarmutlu neighborhood. Current political realities will dictate that the rule of law take a back seat in this dispute. Its implications, however, for the city's ability to address the much larger and more serious issues of illegal construction and earthquake preparedness are worrying.

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